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AMERICAN PILOTS IN THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN, (U)  
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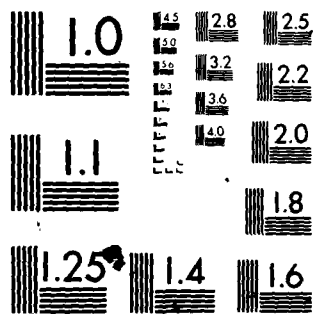
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AMERICAN PILOTS IN THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army  
Command and General Staff College in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

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Fort Leavenworth, Kansas  
1980

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This study determines the extent of American pilot participation as members of the Royal Air Force flying in the Battle of Britain. It also examines the recruiting mechanism by which the Americans became involved in the war and documents their contributions as combat pilots during the battle itself.

Research reveals that, while many American citizens were recruited to fly for Britain during the summer of 1940, only six Americans are known to have actually participated in the Battle of Britain, fought between 12 August and 15 September 1940. These men not only demonstrated America's determination to support her allies, but materially contributed to Britain's cause by destroying two and one half enemy aircraft, probably destroying five others, and damaging two more during their brief RAF careers.

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American Pilots in the Battle of Britain

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### BACKGROUND

The Battle of Britain, although small in scale compared with subsequent fighting, was nevertheless one of the decisive battles of the Second World War. It was not until victory was gained that Churchill received the wholehearted support of the British public and the option of petitioning for a compromise peace with Hitler was rejected. Equally important was the conversion of American opinion to the belief that the British, given help, might win the war. While there is little new here for anyone familiar with the events of August and September 1940, what is less widely known is that a handful of neutral Americans were already providing assistance to Britain while serving as pilots in the Royal Air Force (RAF). These same men were later to form the nucleus of the more well known American Eagle Squadrons.

While it is generally accepted that the Battle of Britain was the turning point of World War II for the British, the battle's well documented history noticeably lacks information concerning American participation. An analysis of this support would be valuable as a source of national pride, and might also provide the background necessary to

understand why American fighter tactics were influenced by British aviators.

#### PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to determine the extent of American pilot participation during the Battle of Britain, to examine the recruiting mechanism by which the Americans became involved in the war, and to document their contributions as Royal Air Force pilots during the battle itself. This information will serve others interested in the Battle of Britain by expanding current knowledge in an area that until now has been largely overlooked.

#### CONSTRAINTS

Data for this study was primarily from secondary sources since none of the Americans known to have flown in the Battle of Britain survived past 11 September 1942.

During the research process, newspaper reports had to be correlated with published data and discrepancies identified had to be resolved. One individual was particularly helpful in resolving documentary conflict. Major General Chesley G. Peterson, USAF (Retired), arrived in England shortly after the conclusion of the Battle of Britain, and was one of the founding members of No. 71 Eagle Squadron, the first all-American squadron in the RAF during World War II. General Peterson personally knew five of the six Americans known to have flown during the battle and his recent recollections proved invaluable in documenting and

confirming published data.

The geographical problem associated with the storage of Battle of Britain squadron records in England, and the fact that some of that data was, until recently, still classified, was resolved by establishing contact with the British Ministry of Defence, Air Historical Branch (RAF) in London. While this source proved very useful, it is the author's opinion that research time constraints precluded fully exploiting the depth of information available in London on the Battle of Britain and its participants. Researchers interested in pursuing this subject would be wise to concentrate their efforts in this area.

An attempt was also made by the author to procure Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) records pertaining to alleged detention of American RAF recruits by FBI agents operating in Canada. This procurement attempt proved futile as Bureau records that might pertain to the alleged incident have been destroyed.

#### SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study will determine the extent of American pilot participation during the Battle of Britain based on RAF historical records, previously published data, and a personal interview with one of America's World War II aviation pioneers, Major General Chesley G. Peterson, USAF (Retired). Also subject to scrutiny will be the recruiting mechanism by which the Americans became involved in the war,

along with an analysis of the impact on recruiting of the United States Neutrality Act of 1937. Finally, this study will document the American pilots' contributions as members of the Royal Air Force during the battle itself.

#### ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

Chapter II provides an historical summary of the events which led to the Battle of Britain, including a discussion of the factors which prompted the Germans to initiate an air campaign against Great Britain. Chapter III examines the process used to recruit Americans and explores the impact of the United States Neutrality Act of 1937 on the recruiting effort. Chapter IV discusses the contributions of the American pilots during the Battle of Britain, while Chapter V contains conclusions and recommendations.

## CHAPTER II

### PREPARATION FOR BATTLE

The Battle of Britain, like the Battle of the Atlantic and the Battle of France, was, strictly speaking, a campaign rather than a battle. It formed part of a major German air offensive against Britain which lasted from June 1940 when the first bombs fell on British soil, to May 1941 when the bulk of the Luftwaffe was transferred to the Eastern Front in preparation for the attack on Russia. Although historians disagree on its exact time span, the Battle of Britain is generally accepted to have started on 12 August 1940 with a series of daylight engagements fought in the skies over southeast England. (15:60) This activity by the Germans was in preparation for Adlertag, the initiation of an intensive series of air raids, code named Operation Eagle, designed by Luftwaffe Commander in Chief Herman Goering to destroy British morale and allow an unopposed occupation of Great Britain. (13:22)

The end of the Battle of Britain, even less well defined than its origin, is generally accepted to have occurred during the last weeks of September 1940. The turning point as far as England was concerned was the decisive beating the Luftwaffe received on 15 September 1940, a date celebrated throughout England as Battle of

Britain Day. (8:32) The author has chosen this date for the purpose of this study as the end of the battle, primarily since American participation in the air war increased dramatically in late September and is well documented in at least one book on the subject of the American Eagle Squadrons.

#### PLANNING FOR OPERATION SEA LION

The Battle of Britain resulted from Luftwaffe participation in a German plan to invade England which had been formulated during the summer of 1940. (5:146) On 30 June 1940 Major General Alfred Jodl, Hitler's closest military advisor, expressed the view that the final German victory over England was only a matter of time. He had good reason to be confident. As a result of a series of victories unparalleled since the days of Napoleon, Germany was the master of Western Europe. The highly respected French Army had been destroyed in a campaign lasting barely six weeks. The British, who had sent a token force to France and Belgium, had been pushed off the Continent by the advancing Germans. Although the greatest part of the British Expeditionary Force had managed to escape, it had been compelled to abandon almost all of its heavy equipment and, as a result, was temporarily incapable of offensive action. (13:3)

With the fall of France, Britain lost her only ally in Europe. Despite Churchill's defiant speeches, many, in-



cluding President Roosevelt and his advisors, doubted whether Britain would be able to resist the anticipated German onslaught.

Ironically, it was the magnitude of their victory over France which caused the German offensive to stall. No plans had been made for a direct attack on England because the possibility that the Wehrmacht would inflict a decisive defeat on the French Army had scarcely been contemplated. (13:6) The best Hitler had hoped for was to occupy bases in the low countries and northern France from which a naval blockade and air assault could be mounted against the British Isles. On 21 May 1940, after the German armor had reached the channel coast, Hitler briefly discussed the idea of invading England with the Commander in Chief of his Navy, Admiral Raeder. Preoccupation with finishing the Battle of France and then with armistice negotiations precluded their giving too much thought to the matter, however. (13:7) In any case, Hitler was convinced that the British, for whom he had a grudging respect, would recognize the hopelessness of the situation and petition for peace. Hitler was anxious to bring the war to a speedy conclusion so that he could fulfil the mission which had always been his ultimate goal: the carving out of a great land empire in the East. (13:31)

Hitler's hopes for a settlement with Britain were not fully dispelled until the third week of July when Churchill contemptuously rejected the German's ill-con-

ceived peace offer. (13:23) In the meantime, Hitler and his advisors had begun, in a somewhat leisurely manner, to consider the possible courses of action should the British refuse to see reason. Britain, with her tactically advantageous location, powerful navy and rapidly expanding air force, would be an awkward opponent for the Wehrmacht, which had been designed for continental warfare. Germany's naval weakness and lack of long-range aircraft ruled out a strategy of blockade. Besides, even if the forces had been available for such a plan, its execution would be far too time consuming for a man with as little patience as Hitler. An invasion seemed the quickest and surest method of conquering Britain. The Royal Navy's overwhelming superiority in surface ships complicated this plan, however. It was clear that troops could only be landed once air superiority had been achieved and even then there would be a great deal of risk.

Unlike some of his generals, Hitler did not regard the voyage across the Channel as merely an extended river crossing. As Admiral Raeder was quick to point out, the navy's huge losses during the Norwegian campaign would allow her to provide little or no protection for the invasion fleet. Hitler agreed that the invasion should be a last resort measure, to be exercised only once the British had been softened by air bombardment. If, as its Commander in Chief Herman Goering boasted, the Luftwaffe was capable of single-handedly defeating Britain, the government might

capitulate before the first assault troops crossed the Channel.

On 16 July, Hitler announced in a directive that he had decided to prepare for, and if necessary carry out, an invasion of England. The operation was to be code named Sea Lion and preparations were to be completed by the middle of August. A lack of inter-service cooperation doomed the project from the start, however. Goering could not be bothered by Sea Lion and did not attend a single planning session, yet the other services were relying upon the Luftwaffe to establish the conditions for the landing. Disputes between the army and navy over a number of issues led on 1 August to the postponement of Sea Lion until the middle of September. On the same day Hitler, who was becoming impatient with Goering's attitude, ordered the Luftwaffe to begin intensified warfare against England on or after 5 August. The Royal Air Force was to be neutralized as quickly as possible after which the attacks were to be directed against ports. Facilities on the south coast which might be needed for Sea Lion were, however, to be spared.

Goering issued his tactical instructions for the air offensive, which he christened Eagle, on 2 August. The low esteem in which he held the Royal Air Force is demonstrated by the fact that he allowed only four days for its elimination south of a line from Gloucester to London and four weeks for its total annihilation.

Goering's confidence in his air arm was not totally



unfounded. Although the Luftwaffe had officially been in existence for little more than five years, it had already acquired a legendary reputation. It had played a spectacular and decisive role in the Polish, Norwegian, and French campaigns. The setback it had suffered at the hands of the RAF over Dunkirk in May 1940 was soon forgotten and its significance overlooked because of the more numerous successes the Luftwaffe had enjoyed. Yet, formidable though it was, the Luftwaffe was in many respects ill-equipped for the task which it had been given and which its leaders so readily accepted. It had been designed not for independent strategic bombing but rather for tactical support of the army in the field, a role which it had performed with noted success. Its organization, the training of its crews and the weapons they were provided all reflected this purpose. The Luftwaffe lacked the essential instrument for an effective air offensive, the long-range bomber. The medium and dive bombers which formed its striking force did not have the necessary range, armament or capacity for strategic operations and were vulnerable to the latest fighters.

(5:125)

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE LUFTWAFFE

The Luftwaffe was also severely handicapped by the limited endurance (about eighty minutes) of its standard fighter, the Bf 109, which in other respects was an outstanding aircraft. The flight across the Channel and back

took approximately one hour, leaving only twenty minutes for combat over England. The longer ranged Bf 110 proved inferior to the RAF's Hurricanes and Spitfires and therefore had to be protected by the faster and more nimble Bf 109. (5:127) Since the German bombers were too vulnerable to fly without escort in daylight, their operational zone was necessarily restricted to the Bf 109's radius of action. This was primarily London and the southeast corner of England where the British defenses were concentrated. Further complicating the problem was a lack of Bf 109s to provide adequate cover for the bombers, each of which needed an escort of at least two fighters. This, in effect, reduced the total number of bombers that could be launched against the British at any one time to three or four hundred. (3:452)

The Luftwaffe high command was only vaguely aware of these deficiencies. (5:126) Goering, who was more of a politician than an airman by this time, greatly overestimated the strength of his Luftwaffe. He had been a dashing fighter pilot during the First World War, but he had resigned his commission in 1922 and had since then lost touch with the development of military aviation. Hitler took little interest in air warfare and was content to leave the management of the Luftwaffe entirely to his party faithful.

Though he was not without ability, Goering had neither the technical knowledge nor the professional experi-

ence to command a modern air force. He lacked the capacity for sustained work and concerned himself only spasmodically with Luftwaffe affairs, preferring to lead a life of self-indulgent ease on his country estate. His chief of staff, Hans Jeschonnek, was an ardent Nazi and was not disposed to challenge his overbearing superior. In any case, he shared many of Goering's illusions about the Luftwaffe's potential.

#### BRITISH PREPARATION FOR INVASION

While the Battle of Britain was, from Germany's point of view, an improvised operation hastily mounted with the resources at hand, the RAF had been preparing for it over a period of more than four years. By the summer of 1940 a sophisticated system of air defense had been developed under the direction of the Commander in Chief of Fighter Command, Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding. The cornerstone of this system was the chain of fifty-two radar stations which formed a buffer zone between Britain and the rest of Europe. In the early 1930s the problem of intercepting enemy bombers before they reached their targets had seemed insoluble since the defending fighters had to be alerted while the inbound raiders were still well out to sea. In 1935, however, Robert Watson Watt demonstrated that radio waves might be used to detect and locate approaching aircraft. His ideas were applied by another distinguished scientist, Sir Henry Tizard, who molded the

theory to meet operational requirements. Although the radar screen was not quite complete when the Battle of Britain began, it was able to provide accurate information on the distance and bearing of hostile aircraft at ranges of seventy miles or more and give a rough estimation of their height and number. The Germans were aware of the existence of the radar stations whose towering masts were obvious landmarks, but they underestimated their efficiency and did not realize how closely they had been integrated into the British air defense system. Radar enabled the British fighters to mass at the critical place and time to engage inbound strike flights and eliminated the need for standing fighter patrols. Without radar information Fighter Command would have been at a hopeless disadvantage. (15:57)

Information from radar stations and Observer Corps posts was passed by means of an elaborate network of communications to one of the four groups into which Fighter Command was divided. The most important of these was No. 11 Group which was responsible for the defense of London and the southeast of England. Its commander was Air Vice Marshal Keith Park, a New Zealander who, although very different in personality from Dowding, agreed with him on the employment of the fighter force. No. 12 Group under Air Vice Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory covered the Midlands; No. 13 Group, under Air Vice Marshal R.E. Saul, Scotland and the north of England; and No. 10 Group, under Air Vice Marshal Sir Quinton Brand, the southwest.



**DISPOSITION OF BRITISH FIGHTER FORCES**  
9th July 1940

**Legend**

Boundaries of Fighter Groups..... ———  
Sectors..... - - - - -

The figures show the number of fighters in each sector, on the basis of a "tactical strength" of twelve aircraft a squadron.

Types are shown thus:-

Hurricanes and Spitfires..... (24)  
Blenheims..... [12]  
Defiants..... (12)

**No 10 GROUP**

WICK (24)  
TURNHOUSE (48) (12)  
USWORTH (24) (12)  
CATTERICK (12)  
CHURCH FENTON (36)  
KIRTON-IN-LINDSEY (24)  
DIGBY (24) (12)  
WITTERING (24) (12)  
DUXFORD (12) (12)  
COLTISHALL (24)  
DEBDEN (24) (12)  
NORTH WEALD (12)  
HORNCHURCH (36) (12)  
HILL (12)  
KENLEY (36)  
TANGMERE (36)  
MIDDLE WALLOP (36)  
NORTHOLT (24)  
FILTON (24)  
PEMBREY (12)  
ST EVAL (12)

**No 11 GROUP**

**No 12 GROUP**

**No 13 GROUP**

**No 14 GROUP**

**Figure 2. Disposition of British Fighter Forces**

**Figure 2. Disposition of British Fighter Forces**

Fighter Command was fortunate in being led by men of unrivaled professional ability and experience. Dowding, who but for the outbreak of the war would have been retired in 1939, was a career officer with a keen interest in the application of science to modern warfare. Fighter Command was largely Dowding's creation. Austere, reserved and dedicated, he presented a complete contrast to the flamboyant and vainglorious Goering. Dowding's stubborn opposition to the War Cabinet's proposal to send additional fighter squadrons to France after the German breakthrough in May 1940 ensured there would be sufficient forces with which to fight the Battle of Britain. Unlike their German counterparts, many of whom had army backgrounds, Dowding and his senior officers had more than a quarter century of continuous service in military aviation. (5:131)

The prelude to the battle was an attempt by Goering early in July to wear down and test Fighter Command by attacking ports and shipping in the Channel. Neither side was at full strength, for the Luftwaffe had not yet completed its redeployment after the French campaign, and Dowding prudently refused to commit more than a small number of squadrons in conditions which usually favored the enemy. The Kanalkampf, as the Germans called their plan for attacking British shipping, continued with mounting intensity until well into August. The results of these preliminary skirmishes were inconclusive. The Germans sank 30,000 tons of shipping and succeeded in establishing air

superiority over the Straits of Dover during daylight, but their aircraft losses were twice those of the British.

#### BRITISH FIGHTER AIRCRAFT

During this period the RAF had a front line strength of nearly 700 fighters. All but a few of the fifty-five fighter squadrons were equipped with Hurricanes or Spitfires, whose eight wing-mounted Browning machine guns were capable of destroying a bomber in a two second burst of fire. (5:90) The Hurricane had been overshadowed in the popular imagination by the more glorious Spitfire, although numerically it formed the backbone of the fighter defenses. It was a steady, robust and highly maneuverable aircraft but was inferior in performance to the Bf 109. (5:97) There was little difference between the Bf 109 and the Spitfire, although the Germans' clever system of direct fuel injection gave the Bf 109 some advantage in certain parts of the flight envelope. In terms of the number and quality of their single-engined fighters and the skill and courage of the men who flew them, the two sides were evenly matched. The British, however, had greater reserves and, thanks to the forceful methods of Lord Beaverbrook, the Minister of Aircraft Production, were producing more than twice as many aircraft as the Germans. Between June and September 1940, deliveries of Bf 109s averaged only 190 a month, compared with 470 Hurricanes and Spitfires.

### THE NEED FOR PILOTS

The outlook for manning the fighter force was far less encouraging. Nearly 300 pilots had been lost during the Battle of France (one third of the total force), and at the beginning of August Fighter Command was still 154 pilots below the required number, despite the welcome addition to its ranks of trained recruits from France, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Canada. This set the stage for an organized effort to recruit and train American volunteers to fly with the British to help repel the Nazi threat.

### CHAPTER III

#### RECRUITING AMERICANS

It became increasingly obvious by the spring of 1940 that Britain's depleted pilot pool would no longer be sufficient to man the war machines of the RAF, a problem complicated by the recent increase in fighter production. One major source of pilot talent was still untapped, however. According to Captain Eddie V. Rickenbacker, America's premier World War I fighter ace, in May 1940 there were nearly eight thousand United States military and civilian pilots fit for combat duty. (17:8)

Britain's Ministry of Defence was well aware of both the size and potential talent of this group but was also acutely aware of the United States Neutrality Act of 1937, the provisions of which declared illegal any attempt to recruit or enlist Americans for foreign military service within the territory of the United States. Furthermore, volunteers caught transiting a combat zone and travelling on belligerent ships were also in violation of the Neutrality Act and were subject to a maximum fine of one thousand dollars and two years in prison. (37:5)

Nonetheless, Britain was nearly desperate. She clearly did not have sufficient time to develop pilots from inexperienced civilians. What she needed was to

recruit experienced aviators. Even qualifying a commercial pilot in aerial gunnery in a fighter would take precious months, assuming that training space could be found in the rapidly expanding combat arena over England. It was while she was negotiating with Canada for additional training space that Britain saw the opportunity to indirectly approach America concerning her pilot needs.

Appealing to Canada's sense of the commonwealth, Britain convinced Ottawa to meet with the United States over the issue of joint defense. Moving rapidly, Canada formed a Joint Defense Board and invited the United States to send a similar delegation to Ottawa in August 1940 to discuss defense issues of mutual interest. Both this meeting and a second held two weeks later at the United States Army War College proved extremely useful for Britain's cause. (28:16)

Canada convinced the United States it would be beneficial to allow some American air officers a leave of absence to permit their taking a turn of service in the Royal Air Force in the same manner as the German and Italian airmen who aided General Franco during the Spanish Civil War. (28:16)

The thrust of the plan was to provide valuable instruction for the Americans in modern air warfare while the British would enjoy the service of experienced military fliers. It was recognized that the Neutrality Act would probably prohibit the plan unless it could be amended or

repealed, proposals which were drawing increasingly vocal support in the nation's press. Canada was quick to point out, however, that there were already American pilots serving in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) who had not forfeited their citizenship since they had not been required to swear an oath of allegiance to the King. (28:16) Perhaps the Americans would be willing to assume flight instructor positions in Canada and free the RCAF pilots to fly for Britain.

In conjunction with her Canadian effort to enlist American pilot support, England also initiated a series of newspaper pleas outlining her need for trained aviators. The 16 July 1940 New York Times published an article from London which for the first time openly appealed to the United States for ". . . an unlimited number of trained airplane pilots and Morse operators from the United States to serve in the Royal Air Force." (19:11) The article carefully explained that there was no shortage of untrained volunteers in Britain, but that trained pilots were badly needed because of increased aircraft production and procurement from abroad. The question of the Neutrality Act was not directly addressed, although the article assured prospects that they would not be required to swear allegiance to the King to receive a commission in the Royal Air Force.

The article emphasized the need for trained pilots between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five and admitted

that once they passed the physical examination, candidates would be briefly trained in formation flying and then ". . . shipped at the British government's expense to the United Kingdom to go into action at once." (19:11)

Two days later the newspapers were reporting a United States Justice Department ruling that would allow candidates for foreign service to leave America on their own initiative, join the RAF without taking the oath of allegiance to a foreign power and still retain their citizenship. One important aspect of the ruling was not to be overlooked, however, and was the cause for concern for more than a few United States citizens. Specifically, enlistment in foreign armies was forbidden when any portion of the action, including recruiting, occurred within the territory or jurisdiction of the United States. (20:12) But at least one American family would have had difficulty justifying its recruiting activity had the Justice Department been interested.

#### THE SWEENY PROJECT

By May 1940 at least thirty-two American volunteers had already been sent to Paris to fly for the French Armée de l'Air, each recruited and dispatched by Colonel Charles Sweeny or one of his relatives with little regard for the Neutrality Act or Justice Department interpretations. (8:12)

The Sweeny family had long been influential thanks to another Charles Sweeny, the Colonel's father, who had made a fortune in the goldfields of Idaho and British Colom-



bia, but who was unable to prevent his eldest son's dismissal from the Military Academy at West Point because of hazing offenses. Discouraged, young Charles traveled to South America as an engineer and then became involved in military ventures, normally supplying weapons and trained personnel. He is known to have supported uprisings in Mexico, Venezuela, and Honduras. (8:12) He enlisted in the French Foreign Legion in 1914, at the age of thirty-two, and fought in the American Expeditionary Forces as a colonel. In 1920 he served with the Poles as a brigadier general in the Russo-Polish War. Charles Sweeny also organized an air squadron of Americans and other pilots for the French Army in the Riff War and became chief of the Sultan of Morocco's air force. More recently he had fought against the Fascists in Spain on behalf of the Loyalists. (8:12)

When the Nazi invasion of Poland and the Soviet Army's coordinated invasion of Finland touched off World War II, Colonel Charles Sweeny appeared in France once again. Two months later, however, he was in Canada to begin recruiting 150 American pilots for a French Air Force detachment to be modeled after the famed Lafayette Escadrille of World War I. Sweeny found himself cramped by the United States Neutrality Act, by the hostility of some major pro-German United States newspapers, and by a general indifference on the part of the American public. Nevertheless, by May of 1940 he had sent thirty-two volunteers to Paris just in time for them to become involved in the chaos that pre-

ceeded the fall of France during the third week in June. Four of the American volunteers in that group were killed, nine became prisoners of the Germans, and the others made their way elsewhere. Of six who escaped to England, three (Andy Mamedoff, Gene Tobin, and Vernon Keough) were to join the Royal Air Force and fly fighters against Germany during the Battle of Britain. (8:12)

The energetic Colonel Sweeny was aided in his cause by more than just his father's fortune. His nephew, also named Charles, was a well heeled American sportsman, businessman and socialite living in London. Younger Charles was doing for the army what his uncle was so interested in doing for the air force. He organized a motorized squadron made up of leading members of the American community in London and commissioned his force the American Mechanized Defence Corps. (8:13)

RAF historical records in London contain a 27 June 1940 letter from Charles Sweeny to Sir Hugh Seeley of the Air Ministry urging that an American Air Defense Corps be formed ". . . under the command of my uncle . . . as an adjunct to my American Mechanized Defence Corps which has completed its first unit of fifty members for the London Defence under the direction of Lt Gen Sir Sergison Brooks." (8:13) In an accompanying memorandum marked "private and confidential" Sweeny pointed out that the American recruiting organization of his uncle, "known and unofficially approved in the highest quarters in Washington," was still

in existence despite the collapse of France. Sweeny added that a considerable number of experienced American pilots had been interviewed and approved and could readily be made available to the proposed Air Defence Corps. Colonel Sweeny had estimated, he said, that ten thousand American volunteers with flying experience could be recruited if they were assured that they could serve without loss of citizenship and if adequate financial help could be arranged. (8:13)

Not a timid person, Charles Sweeny attempted to further his proposal by calling upon Lord Beaverbrook, Minister of Aircraft Production, and Brendan Bracken, personal assistant to Prime Minister Winston Churchill, followed by a presentation before the Air Staff and Air Marshal Sir Sholto Douglas, chief of Fighter Command. The Air Ministry was pleased with the project and authorized the Sweenys to proceed with their plans. Although it would be several months before this concept would mature, the foundation had been laid for the formation of the American Eagle Squadrons. (8:13)

The Sweeny project, although short-lived, was a start. It gave way almost immediately to a larger, better organized program backed by the Royal Canadian Air Force, a recruiting committee set up in Ottawa and New York City under the command of Air Vice Marshal Billy Bishop, Canada's leading air ace. During World War I Bishop had been credited with shooting down seventy-two enemy planes. He induced an American wartime flying colleague, Clayton Knight of Rochester, New York, to head the recruitment force in the

United States.

#### THE CLAYTON KNIGHT COMMITTEE

Knight had enlisted in the American Air Service in 1917 and later flew first as an aerial observer for the British Second Army and then as a fighter pilot for the Royal Flying Corps. Shot down on 5 October 1918, he spent the last days of the war in German hospitals. Knight became doubly well known to aviation enthusiasts for his illustrations in the air war books of such writers as Elliott White Springs, Floyd Gibbons, Norman S. Hall, and Bert Hall in the 1920s. Bishop felt that if anyone could persuade young Americans to fly for Great Britain, it would be Clayton Knight.

The day after England and France declared war on Germany, RCAF Air Vice Marshal Bishop telephoned Clayton Knight in Cleveland where the artist was a spectator at the National Air Races and asked him to take charge of screening American pilots who might soon volunteer for duty with Canada's Air Force. Bishop pointed out that most Canadian trained fliers were already in service and added that the commonwealth air training program was faltering for lack of cadets.

Knight agreed to help wherever and whenever needed. He was provided the name of a wealthy Canadian, Homer Smith, who would aid Knight in his recruiting efforts and provide liason with the RCAF. Smith, who was coincidently a cousin

of young Charles Sweeny, received a commission as a wing commander in the RCAF and was named to administer the recruiting organization that became famous as the Clayton Knight Committee.

Knight described Smith as:

. . . an out-sized individual who bubbled with enthusiasm and brimmed with energy. Homer was the happy executor of a personal family fortune that stemmed from the Imperial Oil Company of Canada. Handsome, likeable, gregarious, Homer had lived for years in Palm Beach and New York, and seemed to know every VIP in the country. Best of all, he was a comrade in arms, having flown for the Royal Navy Air Service in World War I. (8:16)

While both the Sweeny and Clayton Knight organizations were prepared to recruit and process pilot applications in large numbers, the lack of widespread conflict in Europe in late 1939 and early 1940 resulted in few Americans showing any interest in becoming involved. It was not until Hitler's motorized columns rolled into neutral Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg in the spring of 1940 and then overran France that Americans began to experience a change of sentiment.

Based primarily on a manpower survey that identified one quarter of America's pilots as residents of California, Knight and Smith interviewed both pilots and student pilots in the major California cities from San Francisco to San Diego. Concerned with strict neutrality restrictions, they were careful to make discreet inquiries and relied heavily upon word of mouth advertising for their cause. Word spread rapidly, however, at the airfields they visited.

Knight and Smith expanded their operation to include most of the major cities in other states and eventually compiled a list of three hundred potential RCAF pilot volunteers. To reassure the American military leaders concerning the intent of his mission, Clayton Knight visited Washington and convinced the Army and Navy air force commanders that he would not interview military pilots, nor would his committee recruit the aircraft mechanics whose services were badly needed in the United States. Knight's final and most convincing argument for continuing his mission concerned the differences between Canadian and American standards for pilots. For instance, the Canadians accepted fliers with 20/40 vision correctable with glasses, while the United States insisted upon recruits possessing 20/20 vision. Canadian rules governing age limits and marital status were also more liberal. (19:11) Knight persuaded the generals and admirals that there was little likelihood Canada and America were competing for the same men.

Commenting later on his meeting with the military leaders, Knight said that General Henry H. Arnold, chief of the United States Army Air Corps, agreed that there was no problem and said:

According to the rules I'm working under, if a flying cadet gets fractious, goes in for low stunt flying, gets drunk even once, or we discover he's married, we've got to wash him out. If I was fighting a war, they're the kind I would want to keep. I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of our washouts look you up. (8:16)

Convinced that the Federal Bureau of Investigation would not object to his operation as long as pilots were not actually solicited, Knight decided to establish the Knight Committee headquarters in New York's Waldorf Astoria Hotel to answer unsolicited applications from pilots for interviews.

Pilot interest swelled so rapidly that Knight Committee offices had to be opened in twelve other cities to respond to the demand. Applicants were required to have a high school diploma along with a Civil Aeronautics Authority license to pilot an airplane. In addition, three hundred hours of certified flying experience were required, although many successful applicants were later to admit to falsifying their total flying time to meet the committee's requirement. (8:22) Finally, men under the age of twenty-one required the consent of a parent or guardian to join.

Just as Clayton Knight and Homer Smith were beginning to cope with the increased interest their efforts were generating during the summer of 1940, they found their recruiting mission was changing.

The British Embassy in Washington had become disenchanted with the methods employed by the Sweeny recruiting organization in the United States. Unlike the Knight Committee which was acutely concerned with public opinion and America's position as a neutral nation, the Sweenys seemed to actively seek newspaper publicity and increasingly

enjoyed entertaining their volunteers in the country's premier nightclubs. To reverse this trend, the RAF decided to use the Knight Committee to screen Sweeny's pilot recruits. In the meantime, the Sweenys would be sent to London to begin forming the nucleus of an American squadron of pilots to fight for Britain in the war. (27:5)

Thus the Sweenys' efforts to recruit American pilots lasted less than a year but served as the foundation for a movement which, by the time the United States entered the war in December 1941, had processed fifty thousand applications and had approved sixty-seven hundred Americans for duty with the RAF or RCAF. (8:12)

The vast majority of these pilots were recruited and processed by the Clayton Knight Committee and were instrumental in turning the tide of the air war in favor of the Allies. The men who deserve the most credit, however, are those who led the way early in 1940, establishing a precedent while displaying America's resolve and determination.

#### AMERICAN PARTICIPANTS

Although many more tried, only six Americans are known to have joined the RAF in time to participate in the Battle of Britain, specifically the major aerial engagements which occurred prior to October 1940. Three of the six men, Andy Mamedoff, Gene Tobin, and Vernon Keough, were products of an abortive Sweeny recruiting effort during May 1940.



Eugene Quimby Tobin and Andrew B. Mamedoff were flying acquaintances at Mines Field, California, during 1939 and early 1940. Tobin, a tall, red-headed native Californian considered Hollywood his home. A keen aviator, whenever he found himself without classes to attend at school he hurried to the airfield to learn about flying, mostly from the army aviators who instructed there. By July 1939 "Red" Tobin had received enough instruction and logged sufficient flying time to qualify as a licensed charter pilot. To test his new skills and earn more money for further instruction, the twenty year-old Tobin spent the summer of 1939 flying charter groups into California's Sierra Mountains for hunting and fishing trips. The experience he gained combating bad weather, thin air and gusty winds would later prove helpful as he piloted his Spitfire over England.

Tobin took a job at the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film studio in Culver City to help pay for his flight instruction. His duties included running errands as a messenger and later conducting guided tours for visitors to the studio. Never did Tobin let his busy schedule interfere with his flying at Mines Field. In fact, in the winter of 1939 he enrolled in an aerodynamics course in evening school.

(14:156)

Tobin's friend, Andy Mamedoff, had grown up in Thompson, Connecticut, as a member of a family which had fled from the Russian Revolution. Mamedoff's uncle,

Anastase A. Vonsiatski, was active in various right-wing Russian national movements, including the Russian National Revolutionary Fascist Party which he led during the early world war years. (45:6)

A natural pilot, Mamedoff learned to fly while performing at air shows on the Atlantic coast for several years during the mid-1930s. Once he had saved enough money, Mamedoff bought a small airplane and established a charter service in the Miami, Florida, area. Business was slow, however, so Mamedoff transferred his single aircraft company to Mines Field, California, where he met Red Tobin.

At this time Colonel Sweeny was initiating his pilot recruiting program in an effort to provide trained pilots to help fight the war in Europe. Learning through the airfield grapevine that Colonel Sweeny was talking to local pilots concerning flying opportunities in Europe, Tobin and Mamedoff met with Sweeny and discussed the idea of forming an American flight which would fly for Finland. Both young men knew of Sweeny's experience with the Lafayette Escadrille during World War I and were enchanted with the idea of forming a similar organization. The fact that Finland was willing to pay pilots one hundred dollars per month was also attractive to the young fliers since most other governments were paying their aviators substantially less. Before the Americans' plans could be finalized, however, the Finnish resistance had been

neutralized. Undaunted, Colonel Sweeny swiftly arranged for his new recruits to fly instead for the French Armée de l'Air.

On a warm May afternoon, Tobin and Mamedoff were given train tickets from Los Angeles to Montreal along with instructions to go to the Mount Royal Hotel once they were in Montreal and await further instructions. According to Tobin, the recruits were advised to travel with as few personal effects as possible, but should include:

. . . one suit or trousers and sport coat for daily wear; one pair of good shoes and one pair of work shoes; three shirts, at least one with white stiff or semi-stiff collar; four suits of underwear; three suits of pajamas; four pairs of socks; one felt hat; one pair of leather gloves; neckties, handkerchief, toilet articles including soap; four medium sized bath towels; and one suitcase or leather bag. (14:157)

Fortunately the trip across the United States was uneventful, as was the crossing into Canada. Upon arrival at the Mount Royal Hotel's reception desk, however, the men discovered that no letters or messages awaited them. The desk clerk was kind enough to point out a rather slightly built individual across the lobby who had also been asking for as yet unreceived instructions.

After introductions, Tobin and Mamedoff discovered that the four foot ten inch gentleman was an American named Vernon C. Keough, although he was usually called "Shorty", and that he too was awaiting enlistment instructions for the French Air Force. Shorty Keough, it turned out, was

a pilot and professional parachute jumper from Brooklyn, New York, who had bailed out of airplanes more than five hundred times at various fairs and air shows. (8:30)

While the three men were considering their options in lieu of further guidance, a messenger arrived with money and tickets for the night train to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Their instructions upon arriving at Halifax were to wait at the train station until the crowd had dispersed, but to talk about airplanes and flying loudly enough to be readily identified.

At Halifax the three Americans were led through a series of alleys to a room in a dark building on the waterfront. Here they were given the equivalent of fifty dollars in French francs along with identity cards that omitted their nationality but showed they were enroute to France. The three men were also split up for the ocean leg of their journey. For security purposes the three would be passengers on different ships for the voyage and would not even be traveling in the same convoy for the crossing.

Red Tobin was booked on a large French ship that was heavily laden with pursuit planes, bombers and munitions intended to help France repel the German attack. Other transports in the convoy had similar loads, except the ship immediately in front of Tobin's which was loaded with four hundred mules. Both the stench from the mules and the weather were foul during the entire crossing.

According to Tobin, "we rolled and pitched all the way across the Atlantic and were mighty thankful after seventeen days to tie up at St. Nazaire." (14:157)

Although Red Tobin was pleased to see Saint Nazaire after his difficult journey, the French authorities were not at all happy to see him. Tobin had no passport, had misplaced his birth certificate, and could not find anyone willing or able to substantiate his unlikely story. Although the authorities treated him with suspicion, they did finally allow Tobin to continue his journey to Paris where he was to rendezvous with the other recruits who had disembarked at Bordeaux.

Once reunited, the Americans made their way to the French Air Ministry where they met with officials who reassured them that all was well and that they would soon be flying. The men were given thorough physical examinations which took three days of shuttling in and out of the Ministry to complete. The French were apparently in no hurry, as the processing lasted for more than a month. It finally became obvious to the Americans that the authorities were not stalling, but were concerned with more important matters as the German advance toward Paris continued unchecked.

Tobin, Keough and Mamedoff decided to leave Paris once it became obvious that the town was about to be evacuated. The Air Ministry was to be moved to Tours and the Americans decided to follow, even though the

lines at the train station were swollen by thousands of refugees.

The 150 mile move south to Tours took a day and a half to complete and, according to Tobin, "was an awful journey. Sometimes we had to ride between the cars to get a breath of fresh air. But there was no panic among the refugees, just fear and depression." (14:157) Conditions once they arrived at Tours did little to relieve the refugees' mental state. German Heinkel and Dornier bombers were conducting daily bombing missions in the area and German ground forces were advancing rapidly. It became increasingly obvious that the American volunteers would no longer be safe in Tours, so Tobin, Keough and Mamedoff left by bus for Chinon, about a one hour journey.

By this time the size of the group of pilots seeking refuge from the Germans had grown quite large as the enemy had overrun most of the French Air Force facilities. Food and shelter were becoming increasingly difficult to procure, which further complicated the situation.

From Chinon the group traveled by bus to Arcay and then continued on foot to Air Vault. Tired, hungry and more than a little discouraged, the men retired in a field near Air Vault to rest until dawn when they would decide what to do. Shortly after going to sleep, however, the aviators were awakened by an elderly French officer who ordered the men to Bordeaux, a trip that took three

and a half days aboard a fully loaded train. (14:157)

At Bordeaux the Americans' hopes were completely dashed when they discovered the French Air Ministry could do nothing for them. Out of sheer desperation the three Americans joined with two Czech pilots in a plan to steal two French Potez 63 twin-engine bombers and fly them to England. The plan failed when French guards happened upon the desperate men as they prepared to start the aircraft engines and killed the two Czechs. The Americans narrowly escaped into the forest at the edge of the airfield. (8:30)

A bus trip to Bayonne to see the British consul proved futile for the three Americans since the consul had already left France. Out of money and nearly starved, the three continued their journey to Saint Jean-de-Luz where their fortune improved. Intent on departing France for England, the trio met with the American consul in Saint Jean-de-Luz who fed them and provided the three with a little money. He also arranged passage for them to England aboard the Baron-Nairn, an ancient British ship that would take the men across the Bay of Biscay to Plymouth, England.

It was not until later that Tobin, Mamedoff and Keough would appreciate the narrowness of their escape from France. The French signed an armistice with Germany on 22 June 1940, the same day the Americans finally slipped away from Saint Jean-de-Luz on what later was determined to be the last ship out of France. (8:30)

In contrast to the difficulties Tobin, Mamedoff and Keough experienced, at least one recruit for RAF duty had no trouble entering Britain and receiving a commission as a pilot officer in the Royal Air Force. William Meade Lindsley Fiske III was a twenty-nine year-old member of a prominent American family who had won an international reputation as a sportsman and olympic champion. Fiske's father was an international banker and partner in the firm of Dillon, Read and Company. His job required frequent international moves and the family maintained two homes, one in New York and the other in Paris. (31:49)

As William "Billy" Fiske grew up in Europe, his family's wealth allowed him to participate in many of the popular rich sports, including driving a Stutz automobile during the twenty-four hour race at Le Mans as a nineteen year-old youth. Educated at Cambridge University in England, Fiske was a scratch golfer during the spring and summer and was a skillful skier and bobsled driver during the winter. (24:12)

As a seventeen year-old, Billy Fiske qualified for the 1928 United States Olympic bobsled team and drove the five man bobsled through the treacherous course at Saint Moritz, Switzerland. The American team emerged victorious as the competition closed, won a gold medal in the five man bobsled and set a course record for Saint Moritz with Billy Fiske as the driver. (12:826)

Four years later Billy Fiske was selected to



captain the American bobsled team for the 1932 Winter Olympics held at Lake Placid, New York. Because of his success in 1928, Fiske was also chosen to carry the United States' flag and lead the American team into the stadium during the opening ceremonies. The selection committee's faith in Fiske's ability was rewarded once again as the four man bobsled team won their event with Billy Fiske as driver. Fiske became the only bobsled driver in Olympic history to repeat as the gold medalist and also won the only five man bobsled competition ever held at the Olympics. (12:826)

Selected once again to captain America's bobsled team for the 1936 Winter Olympics, Billy Fiske decided not to compete because the games would be held at Garmisch-Partenkirchen in Hitler's Germany. His decision was popular in the western world, particularly in London where Fiske was working for his father's firm. (24:12)

It was while he was working in London that Fiske met and fell in love with Rose Bingham, better known in London social circles as the Countess of Warwick. A spectacular and popular courtship ended on 8 September 1938 when the pair married. (24:12)

The marriage heightened the respect Billy Fiske already enjoyed, particularly in England, because of his sporting accomplishments, education, finances, and social standing. It was no surprise when Fiske accepted the invitation from several of his former school friends to

become the first American to join the RAF Volunteer Reserve in September 1939. The only unusual aspect of the invitation was the fact that Billy Fiske was not a pilot. He would have to attend the RAF flying school prior to his commissioning, but how could a sporting man possibly refuse such a challenge?

At least two other Americans successfully made their way to England and joined the RAF in time to participate as fighter pilots in the Battle of Britain. In fact, their efforts proved so successful that little is known or documented concerning how they were recruited or what method of transportation carried them to England.

One of the pilots, Arthur Gerald "Texas Shorty" Donahue, was raised on a Saint Charles, Minnesota, farm. Anxious to learn how to fly, Donahue left the farm in 1938 for Laredo, Texas. An able student, Donahue not only learned how to fly but received his instructor certificate as well and spent the next two years teaching flying skills at Laredo. It was the collapse of France that motivated Donahue to quit his civilian instructor's job and leave Laredo for Ottawa, Canada, to join the RAF. When the officials in Canada learned of Donahue's fifteen hundred flight hours they booked an immediate passage for him to England aboard the steamer Duchess of Atholl. Donahue's only concern was that his extensive flying time and experience would be rewarded with a bomber assignment in England, a task he did not look forward to. (22:10)

Arthur Donahue need not have worried.

The sixth and last known American to fly fighters for the RAF prior to October 1940 was Philip Howard "Zeke" Leckrone. All that is known concerning Leckrone is that he too was a farmboy who grew up in Salem, Illinois. It is certain that he was a qualified pilot when he arrived in England, since he required only a short conversion course in the Spitfire. (15:98)

#### A DETERMINED EFFORT

Just as interesting as the stories of the six men who succeeded in joining the RAF prior to October 1940 are the efforts of many other men who did not succeed for one reason or another. Typical of the group of men who tried repeatedly to get to England and finally succeeded was Chesley Gordon Peterson.

Born in Idaho in 1920, Peterson left Brigham Young University at the end of his sophomore year in 1939 and lied about his age in order to join the Army Air Corps. Basic flight training for Peterson was conducted at San Diego, followed by primary training at Randolph Field, Texas. Unfortunately, Peterson did poorly at Randolph and was eliminated from the flying program for a lack of flying ability, by far the most common fault of unsuccessful aviation cadets of the day. Peterson's instructors failed to see the potential in the young aviator that would enable him to end the war as a twenty-three year-old colonel

and fighter pilot with credit for nine enemy aircraft destroyed, seven probably destroyed and six damaged. (47)

Discouraged, Peterson left Randolph Field for Santa Monica, California, where he went to work for the Douglas Aircraft Company. Several other unlucky student pilots also worked at Douglas and the group formed a "wash-out" club for social purposes. The group's spirits soon were bouyed when they learned that Colonel Sweeny was conducting interviews at a Santa Monica motel for pilots willing to fight for France.

Peterson and a half dozen others went to meet with Colonel Sweeny and found him an impressive man. Convinced that Sweeny's plan would result in the pilot career he so badly wanted, Peterson agreed to sign up and await Sweeny's call to begin travel to Canada. (47)

The day finally came in February 1940 and Peterson, with a small group of friends, boarded a train from Los Angeles to Windsor, Ontario. The trip to Canada and the dreaded border crossing went flawlessly. The group was particularly pleased when it was met at the train station in Windsor by two men who knew the names of each of the recruits and were prepared to receive them. Imagine their chagrin when the adventurous group of future fighter pilots discovered their reception committee was composed of two American FBI agents. Offered the option of boarding the train and returning to the United States or going to jail, the group chose to return to Los Angeles. (47)

The Colonel was determined not to let this setback ruin his plans for the young men. His next scheme was even less legal and just as unsuccessful. The men were to pose as Red Cross workers enroute to France with instructions to pose as ambulance drivers until they reached France, at which time they were to join the French Foreign Legion. Fortunately the operation never got past the planning stages before it was abandoned in May 1940. Had the details of the plan been discovered, the Red Cross organization would certainly have been the focus of international scrutiny and suspicion.

Peterson and six others finally did get to England late in 1940 by way of Canada, nearly a year after their first meeting with Colonel Sweeny. According to Peterson, their third attempt was successful because of reduced FBI interest in enforcing the Neutrality Act. It would seem that perseverance and determination were also key ingredients in their success. (47)

## CHAPTER IV

### FIGHTING THE BATTLE

#### TRAINING AND FIGHTING

Although getting to Great Britain was expected to be their toughest task, the difficulties were far from over for Tobin, Mamedoff and Keough when they finally docked at Plymouth on 25 June 1940.

The trip across the Channel had proven difficult for the trio aboard the Baron-Nairn, an aged vessel capable of a maximum speed of only seven knots. Because of the evacuation of refugees from Saint Jean-de-Luz the transport was overloaded with passengers, including seven hundred Polish refugees. The boat had no cargo to provide stability and rolled badly throughout the crossing because of stormy weather. Adding to the discomfort of the trip was the lack of food for the passengers. According to Tobin, the men ate only one dog biscuit during the three-day voyage. (14:158)

The scene upon arrival at Plymouth was a familiar one for Tobin, Mamedoff and Keough. Still without identity papers, the three received a skeptical welcome from the British customs agents. It was finally decided to evacuate the men to London as part of a large group of unidentified refugees. Once in London, the group was detained for

three days in an ice skating arena while officials sought to verify their identity claims. (14:159)

Tobin, Mamedoff and Keough were still determined to fly against Germany, however. They wasted no time in contacting a member of the British Air Ministry who sent an officer to meet with the men and review their qualifications. Unfortunately, the RAF needed more than determined fliers; Britain badly needed men with combat experience. The RAF officer was not enthusiastic about the men's chances of joining the RAF, and recommended they consider returning to the United States. (14:159)

Tired, hungry, and discouraged after two futile months of trying to fly for the Allies, Tobin, Mamedoff and Keough decided to accept the RAF officer's advice and return to the United States. They contacted the American Embassy and were interviewed by a diplomatic representative who confirmed the men's identities with Washington. Soon thereafter arrangements were made for passage to America for each of the men, and they were given a small loan for food and clothing. It looked as if the adventure was over.

At this point the men's fortune turned. They met a sympathetic English woman who was sure a friend of hers, a member of Parliament, could help the men join the RAF. Tobin, Mamedoff and Keough met with the gentleman the next day in the Houses of Parliament and he sent them directly to the Air Ministry. (40:3) They received physical

examinations and on 5 July 1940 the three were sworn in to the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve and commissioned as pilot officers. (46)

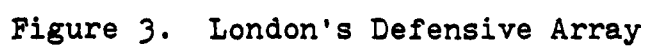
Tobin, Mamedoff and Keough were issued RAF uniforms and assigned to four weeks of indoctrination training at No. 7 Operational Training Unit (OTU) at Hawarden, Cheshire. There they would train with other international candidates for the RAF, including Poles, French, Belgians, South Africans, Australians, and Canadians. Although the Americans had not flown for more than two months, they each spent less than one hour flying the Miles Master trainer before they were advanced to the Spitfire. (14:159)

After twenty hours flying Spitfires at No. 7 OTU, Tobin, Mamedoff and Keough were assigned to No. 609 (West Riding) Squadron, located at Middle Wallop as part of No. 10 (Fighter) Group. The men would be the only American members of a twenty-six pilot Spitfire squadron tasked with defending England's southern flank. (46)

Assignment to an operational flying squadron did not mean the end of training for Tobin, Mamedoff or Keough, however. They received three more weeks of intensive instruction in fighter and enemy tactics as members of No. 609 Squadron before they were allowed to participate in combat patrols. The men learned combat tactics quickly and were soon accepted by the squadron's British pilots, even though the newcomers were "Yanks". (14:159)

Although Great Britain had appreciated America's





pilot support during World War I, the RAF's experience with all-American squadrons had not been entirely pleasant. The RAF leaders were convinced that American pilots lacked discipline and tended toward single aircraft rather than flight or group formation tactics. This was of particular concern during 1940 because the majority of RAF tacticians favored large fighter formation intercepts and engagements. To ensure proper supervision of the American volunteers, it was decided during the summer of 1940 to distribute these pilot assets among active RAF Volunteer Reserve squadrons where the foreigners could be properly supervised.

It was not until the RAF experienced a severe pilot shortage in the fall of 1940 that Britain's leaders agreed to the formation of the American Eagle Squadrons, largely as a recruiting incentive in the United States. Even then, the RAF was careful to assign British officers as squadron commander and squadron adjutant to ensure proper supervision of the American pilots as they battled the Luftwaffe for air superiority. (8:33)

On 10 July 1940 the Luftwaffe began a daylight bombing campaign against Britain with emphasis on attacking Channel shipping. The ferocity of the attack increased as the summer wore on and reached a peak on 13 August, Eagle Day, with the initiation of Hitler's major offensive against England. The German plan was to destroy Britain's airfields with daylight raids and to demolish her factories

by night bombings. (15:60)

On Eagle Day more than fifty German Stuka dive bombers attacked airfields in the area of the Portland naval base. Spitfires of No. 609 Squadron shot down five enemy airplanes. Two days later, in a rerun of Adlertag, an estimated two thousand German aircraft struck British targets. The RAF Fighter Command flew nearly one thousand sorties and the three Americans of No. 609 Squadron experienced combat for the first time. Tobin scored hits on a Messerschmitt and watched it fall out of control. Mamedoff and Keough also fired at enemy aircraft but could not validate any damage claims. RAF results for the day counted seventy-five German planes downed at a cost of thirty-four British fighters. (3:456)

Throughout August the German onslaught continued with No. 609 Squadron in daily action defending the south of England. In one engagement Tobin attacked Bf 110 fighters escorting Junkers 88 bombers over the Channel and was credited with probably destroying two. Tobin described his encounter as follows:

I was patrolling high over an English port on the South Coast when I saw some Me. 110s. I went into them and hit the first guy with my first burst. He was quickly lost in cloud. Then another Me 110 shot ahead of me. I gave him a long burst and saw my stuff entering his fuselage. He climbed steeply then, and then as steeply dived in a sort of spin. I couldn't turn on oxygen and suddenly had what they call over here a blackout. I went into a sort of dream from which I awakened when I was only 1000 feet from the ground. I think I heard myself say "you'd better come to, you're in trouble." Anyway, I landed safely with two probables in my bag. (14:159)

The following day the cannon shells and machine gun bullets of a German fighter smashed the tail wheel of Mamedoff's Spitfire and pierced the plane's armor plating and seat. Mamedoff managed to land safely, uninjured except for severe back bruises. In a later encounter Keough and another squadron member combined the fire of their sixteen machine guns to destroy a Dornier 215 Bomber, each pilot receiving credit for one half of a kill. (46)

At dawn on 7 September 1940 the Germans sent aloft the largest aerial armada the world had yet seen. In the first major attack on the capital itself, almost one thousand aircraft struck at the heart of London, setting the city and its docks ablaze, killing more than three hundred people and injuring thousands. (3:491) The blitz had begun, but the shift of the attack, from factories and air-dromes to population centers, would ease the pressure on England's fighters and airfields.

On 15 September 1940 the Germans launched their maximum aerial might against the British. The losses to the Luftwaffe were so punishing, however, that for the first time Germany lost the initiative. Hitler was forced to cancel the planned invasion. England thereafter would celebrate 15 September each year as Battle of Britain Day. (8:32)

On that day Gene Tobin shot down and probably destroyed a Dornier 215 bomber and was credited with damaging a Bf 109 fighter. (46) Four days later he, Keough

and Mamedoff were transferred to Church Fenton to become the original members of No. 71 Eagle Squadron. The three would help form the combat nucleus of an inexperienced collection of eager American recruits.

Billy Fiske's experience in the Royal Air Force was just as intense as Tobin, Mamedoff and Keough's, although as fate would have it, short-lived. Fiske joined the RAF in September 1939 and entered the flight training program. (24:12) Upon completion of training on 23 March 1940 Fiske was awarded pilot wings and commissioned a pilot officer in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Following operational training in the Hurricane fighter, Fiske was assigned as the only American member of No. 601 (City of London) Squadron based at Tangmere, south of London. (46)

Pilot Officer Fiske's tactical education continued as a member of No. 601 Squadron in anticipation of the German attack. A period of daily flying with little or no enemy activity was suddenly interrupted in mid-August when Hitler's Adlertag offensive commenced against British airfields and factories.

On 16 August 1940 one of the Luftwaffe's primary targets was No. 601 Squadron's home at Tangmere. Shortly after noon the enemy Ju 87 and Ju 88 bombers began arriving from the south in successive waves, each dive bombing the runway and base support installations in turn. According to the official report, all hangers, workshops, stores and

sick quarters were destroyed. In addition, fourteen aircraft on the ground were demolished or seriously damaged, including seven Hurricanes and six Blenheim bombers. (13:132)

Billy Fiske had launched in his fighter as part of the squadron's interceptor formation when warning of the bomber attack sounded. The fighters had no difficulty finding the large bomber formation and gallantly tried to distract the bombers and keep them from overflying their target. The German fighter escort was particularly effective, however, and several of Tangmere's Hurricanes suffered damage, including Fiske's aircraft.

Confronted with an engine which was smoking badly and landing gear which would not lower, Billy Fiske elected to return to Tangmere and make a forced landing with his landing gear raised. His problem was compounded by the fact that the airfield was still under heavy attack when he arrived. Hampered by a dwindling fuel supply, Fiske could not afford to divert to another field, nor would his coughing engine allow him to delay his landing at Tangmere until the attack ended.

Forced to land with his gear retracted and smoke pouring from his engine, Fiske's aircraft hit the runway on its belly and slid forward, skidding between one bomb crater and then another. It had almost come to a stop when the aircraft suddenly burst into flames and exploded. Billy Fiske was pulled from the burning wreckage and rushed to the hospital but the emergency medical care

proved futile. Billy Fiske died from his wounds the next day, 17 August 1940. (13:133)

William Meade Lindsley Fiske III, the first American to join the RAF during World War II was also the first American to die for the RAF and the only one to die during the Battle of Britain. He was buried with full military honors in Boxgrove near Chichester, Sussex, on 20 August 1940. Both the American and British flags covered the popular flier's coffin. Among the mourners were Billy Fiske's widow, the former Countess of Warwick and her mother, Lady Rosabelle Brand. One of the funeral wreaths was from Lord Beaverbrook, Minister of Aircraft Production. (26:8)

Nearly one year later, on 4 July 1941, Billy Fiske was again honored as part of a large American Independence Day celebration throughout Great Britain. Sir Archibald Sinclair, the Secretary for Air, unveiled a tablet in the crypt of Saint Paul's Cathedral in memory of Pilot Officer Fiske. It bears the inscription, "An American citizen who died that England might live." (42:1)

Less well documented is the combat record of Pilot Officer Philip Leckrone. He enlisted and was commissioned in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve on 2 August 1940, nearly a month later than Tobin, Mamedoff and Keough. Already qualified as a pilot, Leckrone required very little Spitfire conversion training and by late-August was flying combat missions as the only American member

of No. 616 (South Yorkshire) Squadron, stationed at RAF Kenley near London. (46)

Although No. 616 Squadron was extremely active during the Battle of Britain due to its strategic location on London's southside, it is not known how much Leckrone contributed to the squadron's success. He flew more than one hundred hours in the Spitfire prior to his assignment to No. 71 Eagle Squadron on 25 September 1940, an impressive average of more than three flying hours for every day Leckrone was assigned to 616 Squadron. (8:10)

While he was not credited by the RAF with any victories in the air, Leckrone must have been a reasonably skillful aviator to have survived more than one hundred combat hours in No. 11 Group's hectic airspace.

Like Fiske, Leckrone was better known once he was dead than when he was alive. Assigned to No. 71 Eagle Squadron on 25 September 1940, Leckrone spent the next three months training with the Americans in preparation for their first combat operations. Training emphasis was on formation flying, convoy patrols and air combat practice using gun cameras.

It was during one of these routine training missions on 5 January 1941 that Leckrone lost his life and No. 71 Squadron experienced its first fatality. Keough, Leckrone and a pilot named Orbison were flying in close formation at an altitude above twenty thousand feet when the latter two collided. Keough followed



Leckrone's spinning aircraft all the way to impact, shouting over the radio for Leckrone to bail out. Leckrone never replied, nor did he attempt to escape the disabled aircraft. Orbison managed to land safely in spite of a damaged left wing.

71 Squadron's operations log said of the idealistic Leckrone:

Zeke was quiet and reserved, and had over 100 hours on Spitfires (in 616 Squadron). He will be a great loss to us, for his influence was a sobering one. If the death of one of the pilots can help a squadron, Zeke's will help this unit for, if nothing else, it will tend to impress on the other pilots the attention they must pay to detail in these practice flights. It is true of this squadron, as of most others in the RAF, that they are inclined to treat all this practice flying as a bit of a bore. (8:10)

The only other American known to have flown for the RAF during the Battle of Britain was Arthur Donahue, the instructor pilot from Laredo, Texas. Donahue enlisted in the RAF Volunteer Reserve and was commissioned a pilot officer on 7 July 1940. After a brief period of training in the Spitfire, he was assigned to the all-British No. 64 Squadron stationed at RAF Kenley. (46) Donahue flew his first combat mission on 4 August in defense of London. The very next day he encountered his first enemy fighters and barely managed to bring his crippled Spitfire home. (22:10) On 8 August Donahue avenged his earlier embarrassment at the hands of the Germans when the squadron intercepted thirty raiding German planes, with the American damaging and possibly destroying a Messerschmitt during the battle. (46)

In his third engagement only four days later, cannon shells tore away his elevator and control cables while incendiary bullets set his aircraft ablaze. Donahue bailed out and British soldiers later found him with his legs, hands and face badly burned. In little more than a week of action with the RAF, Donahue had become somewhat of a war hero in England. (23:8)

Seven weeks later Donahue had recovered sufficiently from his wounds to return to flying status, but by then the Battle of Britain had ended and the plan for a German invasion of England no longer seemed feasible. (46)

The Americans' experience during the Battle of Britain was typical of a war where both aerial engagements and pilot careers tended to be short and violent. Of the six men who originally had risked so much to help Britain repel the Nazi war machine, only five survived the Battle of Britain's explosive encounters to fly again. Of the survivors, one was severely burned and never fully recovered from his wounds, while on four occasions one or more of the men were shot down or forced down by enemy aircraft. On the positive side, the Americans were credited with one half of a German bomber destroyed, three enemy aircraft probably destroyed and three enemy aircraft damaged, a proud record for the young, inexperienced airmen. (46)

#### AFTER THE BATTLE

The end of the Battle of Britain brought little

relief for the five American survivors. Each was assigned to No. 71 Eagle Squadron during September 1940 to form the nucleus of experience the new squadron would so badly need. Difficulties still faced the aviators, especially in forming a viable combat squadron with inexperienced American pilots, supported with little or no flying machinery, and under the constant scrutiny of the expectant American press. (36:3)

The strain of inactivity was particularly difficult for Pilot Officer Donahue, and on 25 October 1940 he was reassigned at his own request to his former RAF squadron, No. 64. (46) According to the 71 Squadron operations log entry for that date, "At this point the entire personnel were completely browned off because of the enormous lack of interest in the equipping of the squadron with any aircraft." (8:8)

Donahue continued to fly patrols over the Channel and reconnaissance over northern France as a member of No. 64 and then No. 91 Squadrons, but even this activity proved too routine for the adventurous Donahue. Anxious for more action and depressed by the damp English climate, Donahue volunteered in the fall of 1941 for duty with the RAF as a member of No. 258 New Zealand Squadron to be sent to the Russian Eastern Front. (46)

The squadron's trip half way around the world was interrupted several times enroute, however, by the Japanese attack and capture of Singapore and subsequent advance on

Australia. During the period November 1941 to April 1942 Donahue flew missions from such diverse bases as Gibraltar, Sudan, Singapore, Sumatra, and Batavia, a far cry from the Russian Eastern Front which he never reached. (18:125)

It was a mission flown from Batavia during April 1942 that won Art Donahue Britain's coveted Distinguished Flying Cross. Leading a patrol searching for Japanese barges moving supplies by river, Donahue's formation encountered heavy antiaircraft fire once they located the water-borne convoy. Donahue directed the rest of his flight to hold high over the target area while he went down to suppress the enemy guns.

On his first pass over the barges he was hit in the leg by enemy gunfire. Stuffing a glove into the wound to slow the flow of blood, Donahue proceeded to use all of his ammunition on the enemy gunners, allowing the other pilots in his formation to deliver their ordnance without distraction. (8:125)

The citation to accompany Donahue's Distinguished Flying Cross read as follows:

This officer has carried out many low level reconnaissance sorties and has successfully attacked enemy shipping and ground objectives. On one occasion, whilst carrying out an attack against enemy troops attempting a landing, Flying Officer Donahue silenced the enemy's fire, thus enabling the rest of the formation to press home their attacks with impunity. He has destroyed several enemy aircraft. (46)

Recovering once again from critical battle wounds, Donahue returned to England and resumed combat duty as a squadron leader with his former unit, No. 91 Squadron, on

22 August 1942. (46) The squadron's missions had changed little during Donahue's absence, and he soon became accustomed to flying reconnaissance once again.

On an early morning weather reconnaissance over the coast of France an enemy plane followed Donahue but failed to overtake him according to British radar observers. Suspecting that a German night fighter had mistaken him for a British bomber, Donahue returned to the same area the next day, 11 September 1942, and flew along slowly enough to permit a pursuing plane to complete the intercept.

The ruse succeeded. Donahue rapidly turned into the German plane's attack and shot it down, but not without sustaining damage to his own fighter. Donahue reported by radio that he had destroyed a Junkers 88, that his engine was overheating, and that he was ditching in the Channel. Unfortunately, weather conditions were severe and air-sea rescue units were unable to locate him. (46) Thus ended the brief career of one of America's most colorful Battle of Britain volunteers, Squadron Leader Arthur Gerald Donahue DFC, credited with two enemy aircraft destroyed, two enemy planes probably destroyed and one aircraft damaged. (46)

Keough, Tobin, and Mamedoff's careers in the RAF after the Battle of Britain were neither as exciting nor as lengthy as Donahue's. The three men stayed together for a limited time as charter members of No. 71 Eagle

Squadron and conscientiously flew training missions with the newly arrived American recruits.

The first of the three veterans to die was Keough who was reported missing and presumed killed when he failed to return from a training mission on 15 February 1941. (46) He and two other squadron pilots had been ordered to takeoff on a simulated airfield defense mission, a preventive measure exercised to preclude enemy attack. When Keough failed to return from the mission an air-sea rescue effort was initiated in the Channel just off the English coast. All that the rescue team found, however, were the tops of a pair of size five flying boots.

"Nobody but little Shorty could wear such small boots," the squadron operations log noted. "There can be little doubt that Shorty's plane dived into the sea at a great speed and that he was killed instantly." (8:36)

According to Pete Peterson, one of the squadron pilots:

Shorty had fairly normal legs, but his trunk was so short he had to sit on two pillows in order to see over the windscreen. Apparently on his last flight he forgot to turn on his oxygen and blacked out simply for lack of air. (47)

Gene Tobin's luck lasted longer than Keough's. Surviving No. 71 Squadron's conversion from a collection of civilian volunteers to a military combat unit, Tobin finally flew combat with the Eagles on 13 April 1941 after seven months of flying training sorties in northern England. (8:37)

Flying combat again was a welcome change for Tobin from the dull, repetitive training duty. No. 71 Squadron had finally been reassigned further south to No. 11 Group's control and expected to participate in more of the fighting over Britain. The men were especially eager to test the new Spitfires into which they had just transitioned. (8:37)

Throughout the summer of 1941 the Eagles found themselves involved progressively in more and more aerial fighting. On the morning of 7 September the squadron was ordered out on a fighter sweep over France. No friendly bombers were involved and the men expected to meet little enemy resistance. The German Bf 109s, saving themselves for attacks on bombers, rarely took off to do battle when only fighter sweeps were intruding.

The mission was to be the squadron's first sweep with their new Spitfires and several pilots, including Gene Tobin, eagerly volunteered for the sortie. Because of mechanical difficulties, however, there were only nine planes, including Tobin's, instead of the normal twelve as No. 71 Squadron started over France. (8:68)

About seventy-five miles inland, near the planned turning point, the English ground radar controller advised the formation that there were enemy target returns to the rear of the friendly formation, between the Spitfires and the French coast. The radar returns proved to be approximately one hundred Bf 109s which had waited for the RAF planes to fly inland before coming up to overwhelm

the badly outnumbered invading force.

The battle quickly turned into the fiercest engagement the Eagles had yet encountered. The Bf 109s attacked the Spitfires of No. 71 Squadron from above, at twenty-nine thousand feet, in diving attacks followed by rapid climbs back to their high altitude perch. (8:69)

The complete surprise of the ambush combined with the overwhelming odds cost the Eagle Squadron three aircraft lost with two pilots killed and one squadron aircraft destroyed as a result of a forced landing. One of the pilots killed in the engagement was Pilot Officer Eugene Quimby Tobin, a combat veteran and brave pilot credited during his RAF tour with three enemy aircraft probably destroyed and one enemy plane damaged. (46)

The last surviving Battle of Britain veteran active in the Eagle Squadron, Andy Mamedoff, was not to live much longer than Tobin. Involved in No. 71 Squadron training activity, Mamedoff was rewarded for his conscientious service with a promotion to flying officer (first lieutenant) on 5 July 1941.

Heavy training losses of experienced pilots hastened Mamedoff's promotion to acting flight lieutenant (captain) on 31 July 1941. The promotion was partially necessitated by the formation of a third Eagle Squadron, No. 133, for which Mamedoff had been selected to serve as B Flight Commander, the first American to be awarded such responsibility in an RAF squadron. (46)



Shortly before leaving No. 71 Squadron for his new assignment with No. 133 Squadron, Andy Mamedoff had become the first of the Eagles to marry an English girl. The new bride, Penny Craven, was a member of the Craven cigarette family. (8:58) She was to become a widow just eight weeks later.

With training airspace over Britain shrinking daily, Fighter Command decided that 133 Squadron should take further instruction at Eglinton, Northern Ireland. The squadron deployment to Eglinton would require two refueling stops enroute but would otherwise be routine.

Fifteen pilots departed Fowlmere in their Hurricanes on 8 October 1941 and reached their first refueling stop at Sealand just before storm clouds settled in. Only six pilots made the next refueling stop at RAF Andreas on the Isle of Man. Three pilots were forced to land at an intermediate field while two others turned back to Sealand. The other four pilots, led by Acting Flight Lieutenant Andy Mamedoff, perished enroute. (46) Once again an experienced combat pilot had been lost in a training accident.

Mamedoff's death, followed by Art Donahue's on 11 September 1942, closed the circle for the six American volunteers who flew for the RAF during the Battle of Britain.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### CONCLUSIONS

What motivated the young men to volunteer for flying duty with the Royal Air Force in 1940 remains the subject of speculation today since none of the six lived long enough to describe the reasons which compelled them to join.

Politically, the men probably experienced a sense of kinship with England because of historical ties which would have interested them in the allied cause. Of the men who volunteered, Billy Fiske was surely the most English-oriented since he had been educated in Great Britain, had married an English Countess, and was living in London when the war erupted. There is also evidence that Art Donahue intentionally joined the RAF that he might serve England.

In contrast, Tobin and Mamedoff were less concerned with which allied country they served. Recall that initially they were willing to fly for Finland, tried later to fight for France, and finally accepted commissions in the Royal Air Force.

The group's political feelings were probably best described by another American volunteer's observation:

Six or seven of us volunteered together, and out of a sense of adventure primarily. But everyone I knew in the group had a fairly deep innate sense of patriotism.

We felt strongly that the United States was going to get into this war sooner or later, and we knew what side the Americans would be on. We were committed to the principles of the British and of the French, their allies at that time. (47)

Socially, each of the American volunteers except Donahue seemed to enjoy the prestige of the pilot officer commissions he received. Several of the men had initially been offered enlistment in the RAF as sergeant pilots. When the recruits threatened to go home rather than accept enlisted rank, the RAF changed its policy and authorized their commissioning as pilot officers.

Donahue, however, was sensitive to the differences between officer and enlisted pilots. He was concerned that men who shared equal risks in the air did not enjoy equal privileges on the ground, and at one point tried to resign his commission to become a sergeant pilot. An idealist throughout the war, Donahue was almost certainly not attracted to the RAF because of his need for social recognition or prestige.

There probably was also an element of economic motivation for joining the RAF among the men. With the exception of Fiske, each of the volunteers came from middle-class families and had worked hard to earn money for flying lessons. Tobin and Mamedoff's eagerness to fly for Finland was largely influenced by the excellent salaries Finnish pilots enjoyed.

Fiske's economic concern was substantially different than the others', however. Since his family fortune was

linked to international banking through his father's partnership in Dillon, Read and Company, Fiske had more of an economic reason to be concerned with the Nazi offensive in western Europe. Flying as a member of the RAF against Germany provided him the opportunity to marginally influence the outcome of the war and thereby protect his family's financial interests, if only to a limited degree.

While no two of the young men may have been compelled to join the RAF for the same reasons, the world will never know with certainty. The war eventually claimed the six just as surely as its sirens' song lured them into battle during the summer of 1940. The simplest explanation for their participation was offered by Red Tobin after the Battle of Britain when he observed:

I think all of us, with very few exceptions, were simply adventurers and romanticists, and perhaps idealists. Few were patriots, but it probably worked into that later for those who got a real taste of what the war was, and were permitted the chance to view liberty from a distance. (14:159)

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

While careful research has confirmed that six American volunteers flew for the Royal Air Force during the Battle of Britain, the possibility exists that other Americans may have participated without receiving recognition. Processing recruits through Canada, in conjunction with the normal reluctance the men must have felt to violating the Neutrality Act, may have resulted in a volunteer's citizenship being registered on official documents, either accidentally or

otherwise, as Canadian.

An improper citizenship claim was unlikely to be discovered or changed on enlistment papers once the volunteers reached England because of Britain's preoccupation with the war effort. As a result, it is impossible to know with any certainty if any Americans were improperly classified by nationality.

For instance, the British Ministry of Defence, Air Historical Branch (RAF), claims Pilot Officer John Kenneth Haviland was an American who enlisted in the RAF Volunteer Reserve on 25 July 1940 and flew Hurricanes with No. 151 Squadron from RAF North Weald during the Battle of Britain. The Historical Branch therefore credits seven Americans with having participated in the battle.

Research reveals that technically the British claim is correct. Haviland was born of American parents on 19 January 1921 in Mount Kisco, New York, but moved with his family to Great Britain while still a child. While it is true Haviland flew for the RAF during the Battle of Britain, he did so as a British citizen, the result of naturalization in 1932, which eliminates him from consideration for the purposes of this study. Interestingly enough, Haviland survived the war and separated from the RAF on 3 December 1945, whereupon he moved to Canada.

The author recommends that further research concerning American pilot participation in the Battle of Britain concentrate on identifying American men who served

in the Royal Air Force without receiving recognition, and determining the extent of their participation in the battle. Adding even one name to the list of six Americans who proudly served England in her darkest hour would significantly alter the history of American participation in the battle as it is now known.

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